

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 1

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White House deception?

'Disinformation' to undercut Qaddafi harms US credibility

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Washington

The Reagan administration is under strong criticism for engaging in disinformation to try to topple Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi.

Many nations practice disinformation, notably the Soviet Union. The Washington Post has now documented a secret US campaign last summer to persuade the Libyan leader that he faced the threat of US bombing and a possible coup.

Many diplomatic observers say that such deception may have adverse consequences for the United States:

- It risks undermining the credibility of the US government in the eyes of the Western allies.
- It conveys an image even to US adversaries that the administration is unpredictable.
- It enhances skepticism about official pronouncements from the White House and other branches of government.

• It is counterproductive diplomatically, because it tends to strengthen Colonel Qaddafi's visibility and compels other Arab states to come to his defense.

"Instead of having a coherent strategy toward Qaddafi, the administration has resorted to amateurish and potentially counterproductive measures," says William Quandt, a former key official on the National Security Council staff. "I have never seen disinformation work. . . . You have to be very careful not to damage your own credibility in the process."

According to the Post account, written by Bob Woodward of Watergate fame, the secret plan was described in a memorandum sent to President Reagan by national-security adviser John M. Poindexter and adopted on Aug. 14.

The memo said the strategy "is that it combines real and illusory events — through a disinformation program — with the basic goal of making Gadhafi think that there is a high degree of internal opposition to him within Libya, that his key trusted aides are disloyal, that the US is about to move against him militarily," the Post said.

Further, the newspaper said, the memo called for "a series of closely coordinated events involving covert, diplomatic, military, and public action" — a plan that Adm. William J. Crowe Jr., chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, voiced concern about.

The US news media became involved in the affair when on Aug. 25 the Wall Street Journal, quoting administration sources, reported that Qaddafi was planning new terrorist attacks and that the US and Libya were on

a collision course. Bombarded by questions from journalists, White House press spokesman Larry Speakes in August termed the news report "authoritative." Other published reports followed.

But the Post, in its account yesterday, quoted the Poindexter memo as saying US intelligence officials actually had concluded that Qaddafi was "quiescent" on the terrorist front.

The newspaper said the plan approved by Reagan did not specifically call for the planting of false stories, but a State Department planning memo provided that the "US government backgrounds media on (1) three-ring circus in Libya with in-fighting among groups jockeying for post-Gadhafi era, (2) threat of resurgent terrorism. . . ."

Asked about the Post story, Mr. Speakes said Thursday that, according to Mr. Poindexter, no attempt was made to provide disinformation to the US media and that the information in the Wall Street Journal article was "generally correct." He refused to comment on whether there was a plan to deceive Qaddafi by spreading disinformation abroad.

Exposure of the disinformation plan is not expected to have an appreciable effect on American public opinion. Qaddafi is disliked, and administration policy on Libya is widely approved.

But the effect on the press, which was manipulated, could be considerable. There is a natural and historical adversarial relationship between press and President which may now be intensified.

If the White House misled them about one issue, journalists ask, how can the news media be certain it is not misleading them about others?

"This creates an institutional problem for Reagan in the long run," says William Schneider, a media analyst at the American Enterprise Institute. "It's better not to engage in disinformation, because the confidence of the press goes down and the relationship now is even more soured."

Whether disinformation is a valid tool of diplomacy is a matter of opinion. Some diplomats say it is legitimate, especially in the case of a dangerous figure like Qaddafi.

"This is a nasty game and it happens everywhere," a European diplomat comments. "But these things run the risk of being counterproductive. The key is not to have these things come out in the press. If the job is only half done, the thing bounces back in your face."

Other diplomatic observers voice concern about the result of disinformation on friends of the United States. With US credibility impaired, critics say, it becomes more difficult to convince the allies to take action in the face of legitimate threats. "The word of the United States ought to be valued," says William Charles Maynes, editor of Foreign Policy magazine. "When we start devaluing the

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word of the United States, that . . . can be dangerous."

Disinformation as a practice went out of fashion under the Carter administration. During the final phase of the Iranian revolutionary crisis, Mr. Quandt recalls, there was discussion of a disinformation campaign against Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini using clandestine radio.

But the idea never got off the ground before the Shah was overthrown and the Ayatollah came to power.

The value of disinformation in achieving concrete results is also questioned. Many Middle East experts say that the Reagan policy of goading and trying to undermine Qaddafi has caused awkward problems for moderate leaders in the region and has not ended the threat of terrorism.

"This reflects a juvenile and ridiculous obsession with this small dictator, who is only a pinprick in our side and no threat to our national security," says Talcott Seelye, former US ambassador to Syria.

"Anytime we get involved in trying to overthrow the head of a government, we will be shown up sooner or later and we stigmatize the people we're trying to support and the subsequent regime is weakened," Ambassador Seelye says.

Diplomatic experts who travel to the Middle East say that the United States' closest friends are upset about the administration's fixation with Qaddafi, arguing that the US is simply making him more popular among radical elements.

A The Post article quotes Secretary of State George P. Shultz and CIA Director William J. Casey as saying that anyone would be better than Qaddafi. But some analysts take issue.

"That's not necessarily true," Mr. Maynes says. "We could end up with a pro-Soviet general who would allow the Soviets to build a base in Libya. . . . In the case of the Shah [who came to power with CIA help], in the end we paid a huge price."